

Analyzing Audience and Tone: A Few Minutes of Planning to Save Hours of Work

“Shitty First Draft” or Plain Ole’ Shitty... Know the Difference

Well-known and revered writer Anne Lamott writes in her book, Bird by Bird that all, in writing, our first efforts (first drafts) are usually terrible and at least somewhat embarrassing. But not only is this okay, it is an essential and important part of the process we must go through to eventually create a great piece of writing. Shitty first drafts are important—because somewhere in those pages and pages of total garbage, there is likely a great thesis idea and wonderful, relevant details and other ideas to include in a better second draft, great third draft, stellar fourth draft, and so on...

Consider these basic questions before you begin to write any assignment. By taking a few minutes to think about these things *first*, you will set yourself on the quickest and most direct path to writing a draft you can actually use. Trust me: you will be glad that you took a few minutes to determine your audience, level of formality, genre, attitude toward your subject and audience, and overall tone. First, understanding your readers (audience) requires you to think about who they are, what they do and don’t know, what they expect, what you have in common with them, and what to vocabulary to use to best communicate with them. Next, understanding the basics of your genre—the kind of text you have been assigned—will help you to select content, support, strategies, and an organization pattern that are appropriate. Finally, thinking about yourself as a writer, including how you feel about your readers and your subject (attitude) as well as how you will address them (tone) will help you to choose the best appeals and control your voice more easily. If you do this work first, your first draft might still be shitty but at least it won’t be shit—there’s a big difference. You can transform stinky, ugly writing that is on the right track into something completely new and maybe even pretty and pleasant. However, a shit draft is useless waste that belongs in the toilet, to be flushed away along with your wasted time, energy, and effort as you start all over again from the beginning.

Use Your Brain BEFORE You Try to Revise

Audience: First and foremost, know your readers. Consider *who* your readers are by thinking about *what* is important to them, such as common or shared beliefs, values, morals, and/or ideas; *what* they are likely to know and not know; and *what* they expect and want from you and your writing. Note specifics about demographics and characteristics: *where* they live, *when* they were born, *how* they were raised, and *why* they may be interested in what you have to say. Take a little time to think and learn about your readers; if you do, communicating with them will be much easier.

Genre: A second but equally important point to ponder is *genre*—the kind of text you need to write and how to write it. Are you supposed to write an essay, a poem, an advertisement, an email, a proposal, a research paper, a book? If you are not familiar with what the expectations, common structures, format, etc. of the genre are, then *find out!* It’s a no-

brainer that if you don't know what you're writing, then—duh!—you can't and won't write it well. Don't produce a big pile of word-garbage; instead, get off your butt and *Google* it!

Attitude: You have two things to think about here: how you feel about your subject and your readers (audience).

SUBJECT—How do you feel about your subject? Is it something you take seriously, are concerned about, think is important, consider silly or trivial? Determining your attitude will help you choose the right words.

AUDIENCE—How do you feel about your audience/readers? Do you have respect them, admire them, think they are less intelligent than you, believe that they are confused and need guidance, consider them equals?

Knowing how you feel about your readers, too, will help you select vocabulary that matches your attitude.

Formality/Vocabulary: After you have figured out who your audience and genre are and what attitude you have about your subject and readers, you can decide how formal or informal you should be and, then, what vocabulary is most appropriate. Using the information you have determined about your audience, genre, and attitude, you can make the best decisions about the following things: whether you can use abbreviations and contractions; simple or complex words; first, second, or third person (point of view); long and complex or shorter more direct sentences; descriptive and detailed or general and abstract words; and so on.

Overall Tone & Voice: Everything you have thought about until now will help determine how you would like to “sound” to your readers. Often, your audience and genre will indicate how friendly and informal or distant and formal you should try to be. Even so, you still need to think about how you want to be perceived by your readers. Do you want to seem friendly, sympathetic, concerned, intelligent, wise, playful, authoritative, etc.? What approach and words best match your tone. For example, to achieve a friendly tone, you probably want to use the first person (I, me, we, us, etc.) to achieve a sense of familiarity and common ground as well as vocabulary that is simple, direct, conversational, and easy to understand. To achieve an authoritative tone, you will likely want to write in the third person (people, students, they, etc.) and use more complex, abstract, and instructional words.

Duh!: READ AND UNDERSTAND YOUR ASSIGNMENT BEFORE YOU DO ANY MORE WRITING

There is no excuse for reading instructions carefully, understanding them, and asking for clarification if necessary. It doesn't take a genius to understand why instructions are important. You are responsible for understanding your purpose and task and for asking for clarification if you need it. If you don't bother to know what you're expected to do and get answers to your questions—or, even worse, you don't bother to even read instructions in the first place—you have no one to blame but yourself if you end up with a poor or failing grade. (And you will also be underserving of your professor's mercy!) So, please, save us all time, effort, and frustration: read and understand instructions right away.